

RIGHT or WRONG? Welcoming the disabled

August 17, 2007

Posted: 8/17/07

RIGHT or WRONG? Welcoming the disabled

A disabled friend told me: “Your church is not friendly to people with disabilities. If the Americans with Disabilities Act could be applied, your congregation would be closed down.” If she’s right, what have I missed theologically and ethically about our church?

I might differ with how your friend approaches the issue of welcoming people with disabilities. Still, she is identifying an important issue for your church to consider. Private clubs and churches are exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act. There are points about the act that congregations should consider, however.

[Previous Columns](#)

One in five Americans lives with a disability that limits one or more major life activities. Almost everyone will live with a disability or will have a family member with a disability at some time in their life. Even with the Americans with Disabilities Act, people with disabilities face numerous obstacles and often are marginalized. Yet people with disabilities bring unique gifts to the life and ministry of the church—gifts the church needs.

What might prevent a church from addressing access for all people? Churches may have budget constraints. It may be a matter of priorities for the church that chooses to budget funds for missions or increased utility costs before investigating and implementing changes to increase access. Churches may only consider the issue when a church member or regular visitor has a disability that limits or stops their attendance at church.

Why might the church want to address the policy prescriptions in the Americans with Disabilities Act?

First, all people are created in the image of God.

Second, we want to make it possible for all people to come to our churches. Making our churches accessible is an act of hospitality to people who are differently abled. From the time of the Exodus on, God urged the Hebrew people to remember the experience in Egypt and never imitate the Egyptians, instead, do the opposite—practice hospitality and justice, care for widows and orphans, serve the poor and strangers. As a result, have compassion for the stranger and sojourner, for widows and orphans, for refugees—for those who are vulnerable.

Third, Jesus welcomed people with debilitating diseases and disabilities—lepers, the woman with the issue of blood, those who were blind and lame.

Fourth, over and over in the Bible, we hear God's call to love and action. "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 John 3:17-18)

How do we respond? Prayerfully and with the sure knowledge that all people, regardless of ability, are God's precious children and worthy of our concern and compassionate actions. Doing so will authenticate our faith to ourselves and to others.

Michelle Tooley, Eli Lilly Professor of Religion

Berea College, Berea, Ky.

Right or Wrong? is sponsored by the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology. Send your questions about how to apply your faith to btillman@hsutx.edu.

- The “Comments” function is being reworked for greater security. We're sorry for the inconvenience.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Baptist churches, in Texas, the BGCT, the nation and around the world.